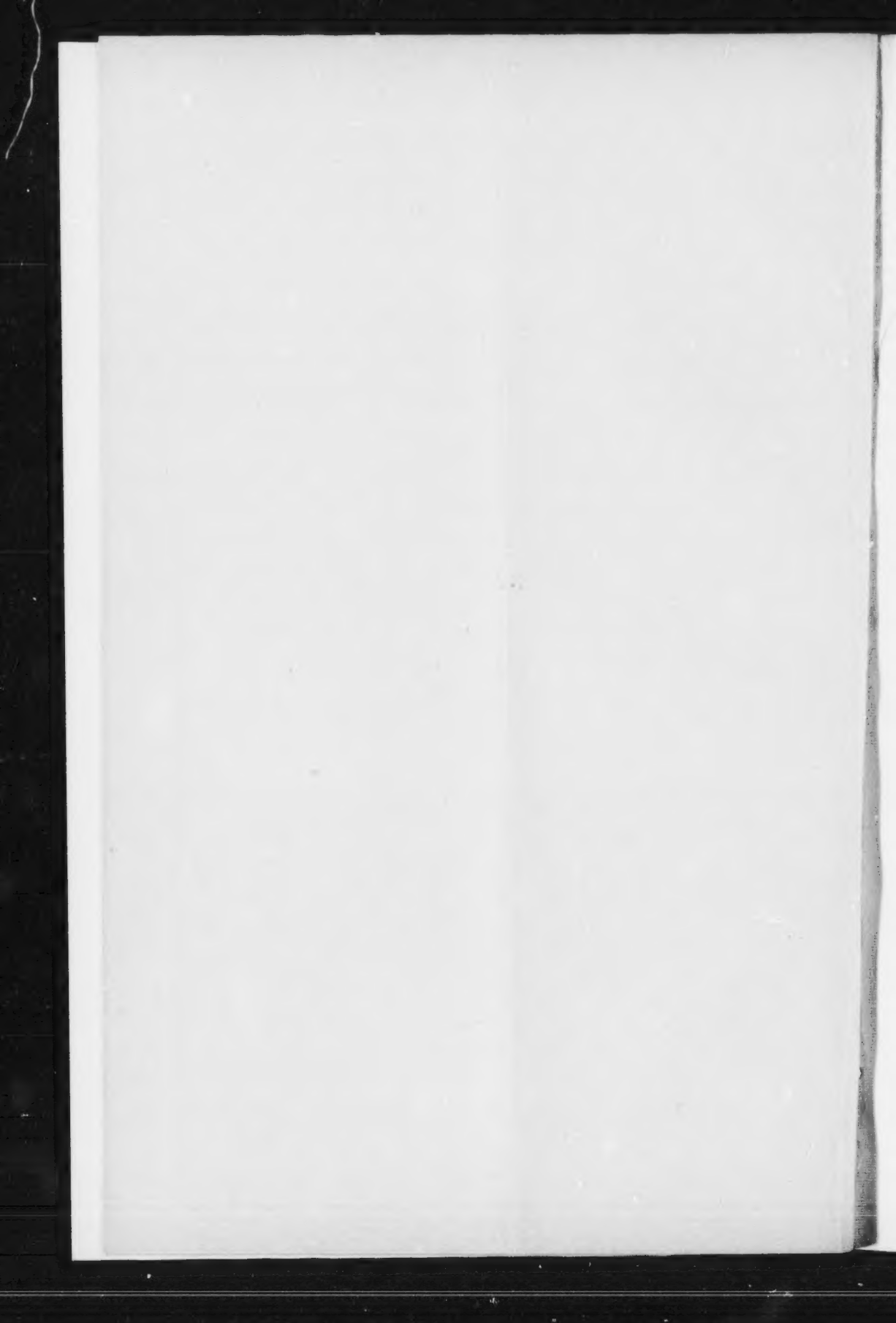


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**THE NIGHT OF
AUGUST 2-3, 1914,**
AT THE
BELGIAN FOREIGN OFFICE.

BY
ALFRED DE BASSOMPIERRE
(*A Directeur of the Belgian Foreign Office*).



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On July 23, 1914, Austria-Hungary's ultimatum to Serbia burst like a thunder-clap in the sky of Europe, which had apparently cleared during the month that had elapsed since the tragedy of Serajevo. From this moment intense anxiety prevailed in the Chancelleries of all the States threatened by the imminent catastrophe. It was especially acute in Brussels, for we knew that, though the political crises of late years had not brought about war between the great European Powers, it had been very narrowly averted on several occasions, and we at once recognised the grave danger of a general conflagration, suddenly revealed by the Austrian Note to Serbia. The Central Empires evidently desired war, since they proposed to the authorities at Belgrade terms impossible of acceptance by a proud and independent people, and since, on the other hand, it was certain that Russia would be morally bound to uphold the resistance

of Serbia. Not for a moment did we doubt that there had been an agreement between Berlin and Vienna as to the terms of the Note. The reports of Baron Beyens and the Comte de Dudzeele, our Ministers at Berlin and Vienna, made any illusions on this point almost impossible. It seemed evident, or at least extremely probable, that Germany and Austria-Hungary considered the moment propitious to utilise the formidable engine of destruction they had been carefully preparing for forty years, and to crush Russia and France before the military superiority of the Germanic Empires could be called in question.

We accordingly spent the last days of July in an atmosphere of uneasiness.

For years the problem that would necessarily arise for Belgium in the event of the outbreak of a European War, in which her great neighbours, all guarantors of her neutrality, would be the belligerents, had been carefully studied in her Foreign Office. We had tried to imagine all the attempts that might conceivably be made to violate our neutrality, and to examine each of them, asking always : " What, in this particular case, would be the attitude required by our duty to ourselves and to Europe ? "

Memoranda had been drawn up, summarising the results of these studies. They took into

account, purely by way of hypothesis, violations of our territory by all our neighbours, including those loyal guarantors who are fighting side by side with us to-day. They endeavoured to offer guidance to the Government in the day of peril.

If these Notes, which were eagerly studied during the last week of July, 1914, are some day published, they will establish the perfect good faith, the complete loyalty of Belgium, even in the eyes of those—if there are still any such—whom the Germans have successfully persuaded that we had already sacrificed our neutrality in favour of France or England; I would say, even in the eyes of the Germans themselves, were it not only too certain that our enemies never had the slightest doubt on this head, and that they deliberately committed the offence commonly called calumny, when they accused us of having failed in our duty as neutrals.* This, as much as, perhaps even more than, all the blood that has

* The following confidential order, which gives ample proof of our perfect independence in our relations with all our guarantors, was addressed as No. 562, on February 27, 1913, to the General Staff of the Army, by M. de Broqueville, Minister for War, and head of the Government:

“The duration of the transition from a peace footing to a war footing will be determined for us by the necessity of mobilising on our frontiers, to defend the marches of our country, primarily against the irruption of light troops (cavalry, horse artillery, cyclists, and infantry in motor-cars), attempting to interfere with or paralyse our

been shed, has made a breach between Germany and Belgium that can never be closed.

The notes preserved at our Foreign Office show that cases of the violation of our neutrality might have arisen, in which the correct attitude for us to adopt would have been difficult to determine rapidly and definitely ;† but I repeat that they prove beyond all doubt the firm resolve of the Government to carry out duties imposed on Belgium by the treaties of 1839 with scrupulous honesty, in every eventuality, and at whatever cost to the country.

In the mind of Europe, our condition of guaranteed neutrality was intended to keep us outside the sphere of conflict, or, should this prove impossible, to secure assistance for our weakness against a possible aggressor. The world can now judge whether, at the moment of supreme trial, our guaranteed neutrality fulfilled the hopes founded upon it, and the Belgian mobilisation, and to seize by a *coup de main* the fortresses on the Meuse, and even Antwerp.

“ In view of these eventualities, the regiments of the 2nd Army Division (Antwerp), and the regiments of Ghent, Bruges and Ostend, will have to be prepared for the possible landing of hostile forces at Ostend, Zeebrugge or Terneuzen, directed against our national redoubts.”

† As, for instance, the case of simultaneous or almost simultaneous violation by several belligerents, each accusing his adversary of having committed the first violation, and claiming for his own appearance in our territory the character of an affirmation of the guarantee.

people is in a position to decide whether, after all, this present of the Great Powers was an unmixed blessing. It will have to draw the conclusions for its future guidance indicated by the terrible lesson of events. Among the Powers which are neighbours of Belgium, are there some which menace her existence, and others on which she can rely for protection? Would not the defeat, humiliation, or enfeeblement of these latter at any period be perhaps the signal for her own disappearance as an autonomous nation? Is it therefore necessary to base the future policy of the kingdom on these considerations, or is it possible to resume the attitude of equal confidence and serenity towards all the Powers formerly incumbent upon us? This is the problem with which the war has confronted the Belgian people and the Belgian Government.

But on August 2, 1914, one fact governed the situation: Belgium *was actually* in the condition of a State whose neutrality was guaranteed by convention, and we were bound to be guided solely by one thought: the necessity of fulfilling the obligations of this neutrality.

To be quite frank, we must admit that the eventuality, which presented itself on that date, was the one which had seemed to us beforehand the most improbable, as being too simple and

too brutal: that of one of the Powers, which had guaranteed our neutrality, asking us formally and directly to sacrifice, for her advantage, the neutrality she herself had guaranteed, and threatening us with all her destructive fury, should we dare to hold to the single-minded fulfilment of a duty which, under these conditions, was so obvious that we had no need of specialists in international law to expound it to the country.

True, the German ultimatum made an attempt to justify the action of the Imperial Government by a clumsy and blundering insinuation against its adversary. It began by the assertion "that the Imperial Government had reliable information that French forces intended to march against Germany through Belgian territory." But this was so evidently a pretext, such an outrageous perversion of the truth, and in such flagrant contradiction with the solemn assurance given us by France only the day before, as we shall see, as also with the assurances the Government of the Republic had so often reiterated of late years, and with all that was known of the movements of the French troops, that the German Government can never for a moment have been under any illusion as to the amount of credence its assertion would command in Belgium.

It is quite certain that all, who read the German Note on August 2 or later, looked upon its first paragraph as entirely negligible and unworthy of a moment's attention. . . . The attack upon our guaranteed neutrality—a direct attack, without a shadow of excuse—was patent to all. Thus —I must record this, because it is true, though it may seem a paradox—the first feeling of stupor produced in my mind by reading the German ultimatum gave way on the evening of August 2 to one of positive relief: *the situation was definite!* It allowed of neither tergiversation nor interpretation. We had no longer to fear that fatal hesitation as to the course to pursue, that problem of conscience which there had always seemed to me beforehand such reason to dread when the psychological moment came, because it might have entailed irreparable consequences through the loss of precious time. But I am anticipating. . . .

Certain facts stand out clearly in my memory as dominating the agitated period between July 23 and August 2, amidst the whirlwind of news which came in from every side, the feverish reading we had to undertake to refresh our memories on the studies made in view of a possible war, the measures of all kinds which

had to be hastily devised, the telegrams, the visits of diplomatists, and the ringing of telephone bells.

First of all, on July 28 we learned by a telegram from Comte de Dudzeele, our Minister at Vienna, that Austria-Hungary had declared war upon Serbia. That same evening the Council of Ministers met, under the presidency of the King. In view of the martial preparations that were being made on every side, the question before the Council was whether it would not be prudent to mobilise the Belgian army.

The Council decided to adopt a measure, provided for by law, which consisted in immediate preparation, the first stage in mobilisation; this was, to place the army on a strengthened peace footing.*

The next day, July 29, the *Moniteur Belge* published, in reference to the Austro-Serbian War, the declaration recalling the statute of

* On July 29 a circular in the following terms was sent to the Ministers of the King abroad to explain this decision (*First Grey Book*, No. 8).

" M. le Ministre,

" The Belgian Government have decided to place the army upon a strengthened peace footing.

" This step should in no way be confused with mobilisation.

" Owing to the small extent of her territory, all Belgium consists, in some degree, of a frontier zone. Her army on the ordinary peace footing consists of only one class of

Belgian neutrality, following the traditional custom on the outbreak of war.

On Friday, July 31, we learnt that the German Government had proclaimed the *Kriegszustand*, that is to say, the measure preliminary to the general mobilisation of the Imperial forces on land and sea. Holland having also put her army on a war footing during the day, the Council of Belgian Ministers likewise decreed the general mobilisation of the army at 6 p.m.†

About 10 p.m. the English Minister came to inform our Foreign Minister that in view of the possibility of a European war, Sir Edward Grey had asked the French and German Governments separately whether they were ready to respect the neutrality of Belgium, provided no other Power violated it.‡ Sir Edward Grey, added Sir F. Villiers, presumed that Belgium would

armed militia ; on the strengthened peace footing, owing to the recall of three classes, her army divisions and her cavalry division comprise effective units of the same strength as those of the corps permanently maintained in the frontier zones of the neighbouring Powers.

"This information will enable you to reply to any questions which may be addressed to you.

(Signed) DAVIGNON."

† The mobilisation was ordered on July 31, at 6 p.m. August 1, at midnight, was given as the time when it was to begin. It was practically complete by the evening of August 2.

‡ *First Grey Book*, No. 11.

do her utmost to maintain the neutrality, and that she desired the other Powers to observe and maintain it.

M. Davignon hastened to assure the English Minister of our determination to do all in our power to maintain the neutrality of Belgium. He begged His Excellency to take our decision to place our army on a war footing as a proof of this resolve, and he thanked Sir F. Villiers warmly for the important communication he had just made on behalf of the British Government.

This step was in fact the proof that England still considered Belgian independence an essential interest. It seemed to imply—though Sir F. Villiers had made no formal statement to this effect—that Great Britain, faithful to the Treaty of April 19, 1839, would intervene to protect us against any Power which should attempt to violate our neutrality.

On August 1, early in the morning, M. Klobukowski, the French Minister, came to make to M. Davignon the very categorical declaration which the *First Grey Book* reproduces under No. 15: “I have the honour to inform you that the French Minister has made the following verbal communication to me:—

“I am authorised to declare that, in the event of an international war, the French

Government, in accordance with the declarations they have always made, will respect the neutrality of Belgium. In the event of this neutrality not being respected by another Power, the French Government, to secure their own defence, might find it necessary to modify their attitude.' ”

This was the clear and unequivocal reply, given by France, to the question put to her by the British Government the day before. France had not left it to England to inform us of it.

Germany's silence was becoming disquieting. On the previous day, July 31, Baron van der Elst had attempted to sound the German Ambassador, Herr von Below-Saleske. He reminded him of a conversation he had had in 1911 with his predecessor, Herr von Flotow, a conversation which had elicited a reassuring message to Belgium from the Imperial Chancellor. Germany, said Herr von Bethmann-Hollweg on this occasion, had no intention of violating Belgian neutrality in the event of war, whatever people might be saying; but the Chancellor was of opinion that a public declaration to this effect would weaken the military position of Germany towards France, who, reassured as to her northern defences, would concentrate all her forces on the east.

Baron van der Elst had also reminded Herr von Below-Saleske of Herr von Jagow's statement to the Budget Commission of the Reichstag in 1913, concerning the recognition by Germany of the treaties guaranteeing Belgian neutrality. The German Minister had confined himself to the remark that he remembered these declarations, and that he was certain that the sentiments expressed by Herr von Bethmann-Hollweg in 1911 and by Herr von Jagow in 1913 remained unchanged.*

On August 1, after the declaration made by M. Klobukowski in the name of France, I was desired by M. Davignon to go to Herr von Below-Saleske and inform him of this declaration, and of the step taken in Berlin and in Paris by the English Government, of which Sir F. Villiers had informed us the day before.

The Minister wished by this means to give the representative of Germany an opportunity of telling us whether his Government had answered England's question as to respecting our neutrality on the same lines as France.

I was instructed to go first to Sir F. Villiers and ask him if he had any objection to my informing Herr von Below-Saleske of what he had told us the day before. The English

* *First Grey Book*, No. 12.

Minister, who had visitors in his room, came out into the anteroom, where he at once received me with his usual courtesy. He considered my question for a moment, and then replied: "The **communication** I was desired to make to the King's Government was made without reserve or conditions; it therefore belongs to the Government, which is free to use it as it thinks best."

I hastened to the German Legation, where I arrived about half-past twelve. I informed Herr von Below-Saleske of the step taken by England in Berlin and Paris. I repeated to him the very clear and loyal declaration made to us that morning by M. Klobukowski in the name of the French Republic. Finally, in accordance with M. Davignon's instructions, I told him that the French Legation had asked the Press to publish a *communiqué* setting forth the attitude of its Government. This *communiqué* was to appear that evening.

When I had finished, Herr von Below-Saleske threw himself back in his armchair, and, looking up at the ceiling with half-closed eyes, he repeated all I had just said to him with phonographic accuracy, using the very words I had used—so exactly that I asked myself if this were merely an evidence of his good memory,

or whether he had been fully informed of it all before my visit. . . . But when he had finished repeating my communication, he stopped a minute, and added: "Be so kind as to tell M. Davignon that I am greatly obliged to him for his message, and that I will inform my Government of it." Then he gave me clearly to understand, by rising and offering me a cigarette, that he had nothing more to say to me officially. But he immediately went on to say, in the tone of familiar conversation, that he was firmly convinced that Belgium had nothing to fear from Germany, and that his Government would no doubt think it unnecessary to amplify or repeat its former declarations to this effect.

Herr von Below-Saleske used the same language to M. Davignon himself on the morning of the following day, August 2,* the very day on which he was to present the ultimatum of his Government. And he further made similar reassuring statements—but each time on his own behalf—to representatives of the Press. "Your neighbour's roof will perhaps be on fire, but your own house will be safe," he said to one of the editors of *Le Soir*, which published this interview at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. Captain

* *First Grey Book*, No. 19.

Brinckmann, the German military *attaché*, for his part, said, at 11 o'clock in the morning, to a contributor to the *XX^e Siècle*, who interrogated him by telephone: "It is not true that Germany has declared war. . . . Our troops have not occupied the Grand Duchy of Luxemburg. . . . These are false pieces of news disseminated by persons hostile to the German Empire." The *XX^e Siècle* published these declarations of the German military *attaché* in its 3 o'clock edition.

Now, it is interesting to note that we had already at six o'clock in the morning received a telegram from Count Fr. van den Steen de Jehay, Belgian Minister at Luxembourg, informing us that the neutrality of the Grand-Duchy had been violated at Wasserbillig and that the entry of the German troops into the Capital was imminent. M. Davignon had this telegram in his pocket when M. de Below-Saleske came at 11 o'clock to pay him his last reassuring visit.*

In the course of this same morning of the 2nd August we learned from a telegram, sent by our Minister at Petrograd the evening before, that Germany had declared war against Russia, and that the general mobilisation of the German

* I have been told that the German Minister met in the antechamber Count d'Ansembourg, the Luxembourg *Chargé d'Affaires*, who was still ignorant of the crime committed against his country.

armies had been effected. In the afternoon a telegram from M. Eyschen, the Luxemburg Minister of State, informed us of the shameless invasion of the Grand Duchy by the Imperial troops.*

The day had therefore been an eventful one. About 7 o'clock in the evening, having finished my work, I left the office of the Political Directorate in company with Baron de Gaiffier.†

Before we came to the principal exit of the Ministry, in the Rue de la Loi, we went into the office of the Secretary-General, which was close beside it. There we went over the news received since the morning with Baron van der Elst. No illusions were any longer possible. The Powers were being drawn into the vortex one after the other by the interplay of alliances. Russia was already at war with Germany. The invasion of Luxemburg showed plainly that war between France and Germany was merely a question of hours. Should we be engulfed in the catastrophe, or would the miracle of 1870 be repeated? The loyalty of France was patent. Germany said nothing, and this seemed very ominous, but Herr von Below-Saleske was so reassuring! . . . Besides, the action taken by

* *First Grey Book*, No. 18.

† Director-General of Policy, formerly Belgian Minister at Pekin, Cairo, and Bucharest.

England, and the implicit threat it contained, would surely make Berlin reflect. Did not the latest telegrams allow of the supposition that the German troops, collected on the frontier, were being moved along towards the Moselle, and would avoid treading upon Belgian soil? Was not this hypothesis confirmed by the reasons advanced for the invasion of Luxemburg, which did not exist in the case of Belgium.*

We tried to cling to this hope, as drowning men catch at straws. Suddenly an usher opened the door, and said, unceremoniously and excitedly: "The German Minister has just gone in to see M. Davignon."

We all three understood that the fate of our dear little country was about to be decided at that solemn moment.

Ten minutes, which seemed hours to us, passed. Then, at 7.30, Herr von Below-Saleske's haughty silhouette appeared on the opposite side of the courtyard, under the glass penthouse in front of the Minister's anteroom, and the German Emperor's representative passed unmoved into the street, where his motor-car was waiting. With one bound we were in M. Davignon's room. It was empty, but at the

*The first pretext put forward by Germany for the invasion of Luxemburg was "the necessity of ensuring the safety of the railways under German control, in view of an attack on the part of France."

same moment the Minister, who had gone into the next room to call his chief secretary, Comte Léo d'Ursel, returned, holding a paper in his hand, and followed by the Count and by M. Costermans, the Under-Secretary. All three of them seemed to be overwhelmed.

"Bad news, very bad news," said the Minister, who was extremely pale. "Here is the German Note, of which Herr von Below has given me a summary. They demand free passage for the German army."

"And what answer did Your Excellency give?"

"I took the paper. I said I would examine it with the King and my colleagues. We have twelve hours for our answer. . . . But I could not restrain my indignation! I told Herr von Below that we might have expected anything rather than this; Germany, who professed to be our devoted friend, proposing our dishonour! . . . Let us translate the Note quickly, and send for M. de Broqueville."

I took a pen, and sat down at the Minister's writing-table, while Comte Léo d'Ursel and Baron de Gaiffier seized the German Note and began at once to translate it. I wrote down the words as they dictated them. M. Davignon and the Secretary-General anxiously watched our

work, seated in two armchairs right and left of the fireplace opposite the writing-table. The whole scene is indelibly printed on my memory—the faces of the listeners, the thoughts that raced through my brain, even the look of the paper on which I wrote down in French the sentences of the ultimatum. I do not think that I can ever forget one of these details. The translation was not easy, as several of the German phrases were ambiguous. Discussions took place as to the meaning of more than one of them, and the first French version of this historic document shows numerous erasures and corrections. No doubt, also, an expert would detect in the handwriting signs of the extreme nervous tension of the writer, although outwardly I remained quite calm, as did also the Minister and the majority of those present.

We had completed about a third of the German Note when the Prime Minister entered. He greeted us rapidly, and sat down by M. Davignon. I read him the few sentences already translated, after M. Davignon had given him in a few words the account of Herr von Below's action. M. de Broqueville crossed his arms, and remained lost in thought, his chin resting on his hand, until the translation was completed.

When the work was finished, M. de Broqueville asked me to read the Note aloud in French which I did with profound emotion, though made an effort to preserve the usual tone of my voice.*

* The translation of the ultimatum appears in the Belgian *First Grey Book* under No. 20. The Germans have published three editions of their *White Book*, *Aktenstücke zum Kriegsausbruch*. The first, which appeared in August, 1914, does not give the ultimatum to Belgium. The second, together with its "authorised translation," and the third contain a *mutilated* version of the text. These two concluding sentence are suppressed: "The German Government, however, entertain the distinct hope that this eventuality will not occur, and that the Belgian Government will know how to take the necessary measures to prevent the occurrence of incidents such as those mentioned. In this case the friendly ties which bind the two neighbouring States will grow stronger and more enduring."

The mutilation may be easily explained. When Germany published the second edition of her *White Book*, she had already claimed to have discovered in the Barnardiston-Ducarne conversations proof that Belgium had abandoned her neutrality in favour of England ever since 1906. Document 39 in the Appendix of this edition contained the following statement: "The documents discovered offer written evidence of the *fact already known in high authoritative circles in Germany long before the war*, of Belgium's connivance with the Powers of the Entente." Under these conditions it would have been difficult to retain the last two sentences of the ultimatum which constitutes Document No. 37. . . . They show too plainly that, on August 2, the German Government did *not* believe in the reputed felony of the Belgian Government.

Our readers will find further details in a pamphlet which has just been published by Berger-Levrault under the title: *The Second German White Book; A Critical Essay and Notes on Official Tampering with Belgian Documents*, by F. Passelecq, pp. 19 *et seq.*

A silence, a long tragic silence of several minutes followed the reading of the document. . . . We had just heard the infamous ultimatum for the first time, and we were thinking. . . . In the mind of each of us, perhaps, the tender memory of our beloved country, in its peace and innocence, was succeeded by some vague idea of the horrors that were coming upon it ; but the one dominant thought in all our minds was undoubtedly the determination to be worthy of our ancestors of the great days of trial. . . . It was evident that the German Note simply made use of the alleged intention of France to march upon the Meuse as a pretext, and that the ultimatum was, in the plainest words, a summons to sacrifice our neutrality in the interests of formidable Germany. Those, who had drawn it up, had not for a moment imagined that Belgium, a country occupying so small a space upon the map of Europe, would have dared not to yield without protest to the will of our all-powerful neighbour. Those who read it, on the other hand, having a different mentality, immediately, spontaneously, without hesitation, discussion, or any exchange of views, formed the definite conclusion that only one answer was possible : a peremptory and indignant No !

The Secretary-General broke the silence.

Addressing the Minister for War, Baron van der Elst asked him : " Well, Your Excellency, are we ready ? "

There was a fresh silence, shorter than the first, but not less impressive. Then M. de Broqueville, very calm, and perfectly master of himself, replied slowly and in measured tones : " Yes, we are ready. Our mobilisation is going on marvellously. It was begun yesterday morning, and is almost completed. To-morrow evening the army will be ready to march — to-morrow mornin' if necessary. — But — there is a *but* — we have not yet got our heavy artillery."

A few more brief sentences were exchanged. Then M. de Broqueville suddenly took out his watch : " It is ten minutes past eight," he said ; " we must at once inform the King and ask His Majesty's leave to summon the Council to the Palace at 9 o'clock, and the Ministers of State at 10 o'clock."

He started almost immediately for the Palace, where he laid the situation before His Majesty. M. Davignon and Baron van der Elst were left alone. The other persons who had been present went out. The Chief Secretary set to work with M. Costermans to summon the Council of Ministers. I found a considerable number of people assembled in Comte d'Ursel's office.

The rumour that some great event was taking place had run through the Ministry like a train of gunpowder. Certain officials and diplomatists, who had stayed late at their work, had gathered there, watching to see those who had been shut up with the Minister come out. M. de Gaiffier and I told them what had happened. I have a true feeling of pride in recording that not a single person admitted for a moment that there could be any answer to the German Note but an indignant refusal. Some among them were downcast, but the majority were quivering with the great patriotic emotion which was to move the whole nation on the morrow. "It is well that Germany has shown her hand. We stand firm. No hesitation is possible now, whereas we might have feared the most terrible uncertainty as to what we ought to do. The army will know where the enemy is at the outset; it will fight with enthusiasm. And, after all, we shall be supported by France. And England will come in. She cannot allow Belgium to be sacrificed. Her honour and her interest alike forbid it. And then, if we are crushed, we shall be crushed gloriously, and, in the last resort, our fate will be no worse than if we had given way. If we yielded we could never look a Frenchman or an Englishman in the face again ! . . ."

Such were the remarks that were exchanged. Scarcely a word was said as to the horrible consequences our reply—it seemed to us that it had already been given—would draw down upon our dear, unhappy country.

About half-past eight I went and dined hastily by myself in a restaurant of the Place Royale. I remember the strange effect the brilliantly lighted room had upon me, and the sort of anguish with which I observed the diners at the neighbouring tables. They knew nothing; they had read the afternoon papers, the *XX Siècle* and the *Soir*, containing the reassuring statements made that very morning to the reporters of those two journals by Herr von Below-Saleske. They were gay and free from care. . . . For my part, I felt crushed by the weight of what I knew, the secret that would be revealed the next day, and would cause such a rude awakening to all those around me. I asked myself if I was the victim of some nightmare, or if I was really awake.

A little after 9 o'clock, I returned to the Ministry. M. Davignon had gone to the Palace. Baron van der Elst had accompanied him. The Secretary-General was, in fact, present at both the successive Councils of that night.

Baron de Gaiffier had set to work in the Minister's office. I joined him. He had already begun to make a draft of an answer to the German ultimatum. . . . "You see," he said, "the Minister will return presently and ask us to draw up the reply. As there can be no doubt what the drift of this will be, I have begun already, to save time."

No doubt some day a record will be given to history of the session of the Council of Ministers which, beginning at 9 p.m. under the King's presidency, was continued at 10 o'clock with such Ministers of State as it had been possible to call together, and only interrupted at midnight to be resumed about half-past two, and to last till nearly four in the morning.

During the first part of this long session the general ideas of the answer to be made to Germany were decided upon.* Towards midnight

* I was told by a Minister of State who was present at the nocturnal Council, and afterwards followed the Government to Antwerp and to France, that not a single suggestion was formally put forward recommending any other attitude than that which was adopted. One of those present, a convinced partisan of this solution, made certain comments on what might have been the consequences of a different decision, just to show the impossibility of such an alternative. This was my informant himself. A great part of the time was occupied in reading the reports of the Staff. Generals the Chevalier de Selliers de Moranville and Baron de Rijckel, chief and second officer of the General Staff, had been summoned to the Council of Ministers.

a Committee was appointed, and requested to go to the Foreign Office to make a draft of a Note. MM. de Broqueville, War Minister; Davignon, Foreign Minister; Carton de Wiart, Minister of Justice; Van den Heuvel and Hymans, Ministers of State; and Baron van der Elst accordingly returned to the Rue de la Loi. There they found Baron de Gaiffier, who had finished his rough draft of a reply. The Director-General of Policy, without knowing what would be decided at the Palace, had written exactly what it was appropriate to reply to Germany. So true is it that all Belgians had but one thought and one feeling on reading the German ultimatum. Only a phrase here and there was recast by the Committee appointed to draw up the reply.

While this work was in progress, at 1.30 a.m. the German Minister arrived and asked to see Baron van der Elst. It was very evident that His Excellency had come hoping to surprise on the faces of those he might meet symptoms indicative of the gist of our supreme decision. The Secretary-General went to receive Herr von Below-Saleske in his office. The German Minister must have noticed the coldness of his reception. A Note, reproduced in the *Grey Book* (No. 21), gives an account of this nocturnal visit :—

"At 1.30 a.m. the German Minister asked to see Baron van der Elst. He told him that he had been instructed by his Government to inform the Belgian Government that French dirigibles had thrown bombs, and that a French cavalry patrol had crossed the frontier in violation of international law, seeing that war had not been declared.

"The Secretary-General asked Herr von Below where these incidents had happened, and was told that it was in Germany. Baron van der Elst then observed that in that case he could not understand the object of this communication. Herr von Below stated that these acts, which were contrary to international law, were calculated to lead to the supposition that other acts, contrary to international law, would be committed by France."

Half an hour later the draft reply to Germany was taken to the Palace, and definitively approved by the Council presided over by the King.*

* For the text, see the *First Grey Book*, No. 22. I think I may state that up to the present Belgium's answer to the ultimatum has never been published in Germany. The German people may therefore have imagined that the Belgian Government made no answer, and that, since silence gives consent, they appeared to agree to the passage of German troops through its territory. If this be so, it is comprehensible that the resistance of Liège should have roused some indignation in Germany.

About half-past three in the morning, Comte d'Ursel was called to the telephone by M. Klobukowski, who told him that he had distinctly seen intermittent lights in the sky, coming no doubt from the searchlights of a German airship going in the direction of France. . . . Several persons had told M. Klobukowski that they had noticed these lights.

Shortly after this incident I left the Ministry. The mobilisation was still causing a certain animation in the neighbouring streets. At the angle of the Avenue des Arts and the Rue de la Loi all the windows of the War Office were lighted up. Several motor-cars were standing at the door.

At the cross-roads several groups of soldiers and civilians were looking up into the air, and seemed agitated. Also there was a rumour that a Zeppelin or some other German airship had been heard, and that an unusual light had been seen circling in the sky. An officer of the Grand General Staff, who was on the spot, was particularly positive about this. He believed that an airship had come to pick up messages transmitted by a wireless apparatus of low power. He told me further that he was alarmed by the thought that a huge park of artillery was concentrated before the Etterbeek Barracks, and

that a few bombs dropped there might do terrible damage, and cause a panic. I heard afterwards that this artillery had received orders immediately to leave for the Forest of Soignies, and there conceal itself.

At 8 o'clock on the morning of August 3 I had returned to the Ministry. M. de Gaiffier arrived at the same time. He told me that he had awaited the end of the Cabinet Council, and that M. Davignon, who had arrived from the Palace about 4 o'clock in the morning, had desired him to deliver the reply himself to the German ultimatum to Herr von Below-Saleske. M. de Gaiffier had the reply rapidly copied again, and went home about 5 o'clock. After trying to get a little rest, he went on foot to the German Legation in the Rue Belliard, where, not without emotion, he rang the bell at 7 o'clock precisely. He was introduced into the private room of the Minister, who was awaiting him, and handed over the Note. Herr von Below-Saleske read it with an air of detachment and asked him if he had anything further to add. Baron de Gaiffier replied in the negative, bowed to the Minister, and returned to the Rue de la Loi.

The French and English Legations were promptly informed of what had happened. At

about the same time the *Etoile Belge* published the news of the German ultimatum.

At half-past nine, Mr. Webber, an *attaché* at the English Legation, arrived at the Political Directorate, where at the moment I was alone, in a state of agitation which he made no attempt to conceal. He had come from Sir F. Villiers to take a copy of the German Note and of our reply. Mr. Webber was aware of the gist of the two documents, but he did not know their terms. I read the two texts to him. When I came to the sentence: "The Belgian Government, if they were to accept the proposals submitted to them, would sacrifice the honour of the nation, and betray their duties towards Europe," I felt a choking sensation, and nearly broke down. But I managed to read to the end. Webber never stirred; he stood before me in silence. He then took both my hands, and looking at me for a moment, he said simply: "Bravo, Belgians!" in a voice that trembled a little. Then he copied the two documents rapidly in shorthand, and hastened away with them to his chief.

After his departure, at about 10 o'clock, my attention was attracted by a growing tumult of sound rising from the town, and reaching the open window of my office across the courts of

the ministerial buildings. It was like an extraordinary murmur, swelling gradually as it passed along. . . . It was caused by the cries of hawkers, selling the papers containing the news of the ultimatum, the exclamations of surprise and anger uttered by their readers, and the excitement, unusual at this hour of the morning, and growing more and more intense, which the terrible news aroused in the streets.

On that day, August 3, the Council of Ministers, which sat from 10 to 12 o'clock, decided to ask for the *diplomatic* support of the Powers guaranteeing our neutrality, with the exception, of course, of Germany and Austria-Hungary. A request for *military* support was, after careful consideration, deliberately adjourned until Germany should have consummated her crime by sending troops into our territory. We were careful to give her no pretext for saying that we had violated our neutrality in favour of her enemies until this had happened.*

* A legend has gained currency to the effect that, on August 3, France offered Belgium the immediate support of five Army Corps, and that Belgium refused the offer. Some blame this action on the part of the Belgian Government, others consider it very noble. Respect for historical truth compels me to say that, whatever decision the Belgian Government should have come to, in the event of such an offer, no such question ever arose, for the excellent reason

One chance still remained—a very slight one, it is true, though it gave some hope to a few of us. This was that Germany, disappointed by our answer to her ultimatum, might retreat at the last moment, and countermand her orders to her troops. M. Arendt, who had been Director-General of Policy before Baron de Gaiffier (from 1896 to 1912), came to see me about 4 o'clock that afternoon. He examined the ultimatum and our reply, and, for a moment, he, as one who had made a profound study of the guaranteed neutrality imposed on us by the Powers, and was the principal author of the Notes mentioned at the beginning of this article,

that no such offer was ever made. Document No. 142 of the French *Yellow Book*, and Documents Nos. 24 and 38 of the Belgian *First Grey Book*, prove conclusively that *it cannot possibly have been made*. On August 3, about noon, the French Minister, speaking in his own name, and *not as the official spokesman of his Government*, told M. Davignon that he thought he might declare that, should the Belgian Government appeal to the French Government as one of the guarantors of Belgian neutrality, France would immediately respond; failing this, the authorities in Paris would probably wait to intervene until Belgium had performed some effective act of resistance.

M. Davignon, who had just come from the Council of Ministers, where it had been decided not yet to make an appeal for the military support of the guarantors, thanked M. Klobukowski, and told him of the decision in question.

The French Minister could not have made an offer of five Army Corps on August 3, for he had received no instructions from his Government on the subject of eventual support to be given to Belgium.

believed that the resolute attitude we had adopted, in accordance with our duty, would cause the German Colossus to hesitate. The political error Germany would commit in inaugurating a world war by an absolutely unjustifiable violation of the neutrality of a friendly nation seemed to him so gross, and the universal reprobation it would inevitably provoke would weigh so heavily against her in the final reckoning, that he was still inclined to doubt. . . . The Germans had counted on intimidating us. They had calculated upon a consent wrung from our sense of our own weakness. The tone of our reply could leave

It seems, moreover, certain that the disposition of the French troops would have made it impossible for the Government of the Republic to offer Belgium the immediate support of five Army Corps at the very beginning of August. In fact, a fortnight later, on August 18, one single Corps of the Fifth French Army was holding the bridges of the Sambre and the Meuse round Namur, and between this fortress and Givet. The three other corps of this army were not expected till the following day, August 19, near Philippeville (see *L'Action de l'Armée belge*, p. 24).

The legend of the five Army Corps offered by France on August 3 can therefore only have arisen from some words misunderstood or inaccurately repeated, relating to the step taken at noon on that day by M. Klobukowski, acting on his own initiative.

It is generally known that, as soon as the violation of Belgian territory was an accomplished fact, that is to say, on the evening of August 4, Belgium asked for the armed intervention of France, England and Russia, in virtue of the guarantee given by these Powers in the Treaty of 1839.

them in no doubt as to the mistake they had made. Knowing now that they would have to meet the desperate resistance of an army, small in numbers, but full of courage, with formidable fortresses to support it, would they not fear that all their calculations and the whole plan based on a rapid march through Belgium would be compromised? . . . Would they not therefore adopt an alternative plan which they would have in reserve for such an eventuality?

Such were the questions which at this supreme hour the Belgian, who of all others had probably meditated most beforehand on the terrible day we were living through, was still asking himself.

May we not even now believe that his clear intelligence took the right view, and that if at the last moment Germany had avoided our territory, she would have shown her wisdom from the military, and, even more, from the political point of view?

One thing at least is certain, for it has been demonstrated by events: the "stunning blow" to be struck at France through Belgium was a failure. It resulted in an unsuccessful attempt fatal to Germany. The battle of Liège compromised it irremediably, by causing a delay of nearly three weeks to the Imperial army.

The battles of the Marne, of the Yser, and of Ypres emphasised the check definitively.

However this may be, a slight doubt still existed on August 3, 1914, as to what Germany would really do, since she had not as yet actually violated our territory; and this doubt seemed to our Ministers, determined to behave to the end with perfect loyalty, sufficient to prevent them from appealing for help to the armies of the other Powers which had guaranteed our neutrality and our independence.*

At 6 o'clock on the morning of August 4, Herr von Below-Saleske came to hand M. Davignon a Note†, which put an end to all uncertainty in the minds of those who could still hope. . . . It informed the Belgian Government that, in consequence of its rejection of the "well-intentioned" proposals made to it, Germany would be obliged to execute, *if necessary* by force of arms, the measures she considered indispensable in view of the "French threats."

* We must remember that when our Ministers were deliberating, Germany was not officially at war either with France or Great Britain. Her declaration of war against France was transmitted by Baron von Schoen in Paris on August 3, at 6.45 p.m. (*Yellow Book*, No. 147). That of Great Britain against Germany was notified on August 4, at 11 o'clock p.m. (*First Grey Book*, No. 41).

† *First Grey Book*, No. 27.

At half-past nine in the morning, we were informed by telegram that Belgian territory had been violated by German troops at Gemmenich.* This village is close to the frontier, a few kilometres from Aix-la-Chapelle. Towards the north it adjoins Dutch Limburg. The first shots of the war were fired by Belgian *gendarmes* on guard at this frontier post. Blood had flowed; the irrevocable had happened !

On the previous day the King had convoked the Legislative Chambers to assemble at 10 o'clock on this 4th of August. In spite of the short time the news had been given to spread, and the early hour, a dense crowd filled the streets about the Park round which the royal procession had to pass. The Foreign Office adjoins the Palais de la Nation, where the Chambers deliberate. One of its façades confronts the little square before the Palace, the other runs along the Rue de la Loi at right angles to the former.

A little before 10 o'clock I went to the office of the Secretary-General, the windows of which look on to the Rue de la Loi, on the ground floor. The town had already taken on the holiday appearance it retained until the entry of the German troops ; each house had hoisted the

* The frontier was first crossed by the German advance guard exactly at two minutes past eight on the morning of August 4.

national flag spontaneously the preceding day. By this proud act the people expressed the satisfaction they felt in knowing that the Government had faithfully interpreted the feelings of the entire nation in its reply to Germany.

At 10 o'clock a first wave of enthusiasm swept over the crowd when an open Court carriage passed, taking the Queen and her three children to the Parliament House. The whole journey from the Palace was a long and touching ovation.

Three minutes later, tremendous acclamations reached me through the Park. The King had left the Palace. He was approaching by way of the Rue Royale; his arrival was heralded by the storm of emotion and the cries that stirred the crowd in the streets, the balconies, and even on the roofs. . . . The procession turned the corner of the Park; preceded by a cavalry escort of the Civic Guard, and followed by the officers of his household, our Sovereign advanced quietly on horseback, in field uniform and boots, pale, but obviously keeping his emotion under control. His features expressing a solemn gravity, he responded slowly, with uplifted hand, to the eager, vibrating acclamations of the crowd: "Long live the King! Long live Belgium!" It seemed as if the people could never tire of

repeating these cries, which blended into a magnificent ovation.

When the King arrived in the centre of the square in front of the Palais de la Nation he dismounted, and I saw him advance on foot towards the steps, on which stood a deputation of senators and members of the Chamber of Representatives, amidst a tremendous, irrepressible clamour. The emotion of the deputation, like that of all present, was intense and profound. With arms outstretched, the representatives of the nation seemed anxious to embrace the King, to enter into communion with him, to tell him—perhaps for the last time—how the nation worshipped its independence and the institutions it had freely bestowed upon itself eighty-four years ago.

Those who witnessed this scene will never forget it, and there must be very few who can say that their tears did not flow as they frantically proclaimed their love of their country: “Long live the King! Long live independent Belgium!”

At the window where I was standing at the moment, and at others in the same room, most of the higher officials of the department were grouped. Employés and messengers had mingled with them. A few ladies had slipped

in, and joined in our acclamations. Comtesse X——, the wife of a young officer of the Guides, who was to fall gloriously confronting the enemy a few days later, was one of the most deeply moved. In the middle of the room, somewhat apart, stood the Councillor of the Austro-Hungarian Legation. He had come in by chance with some communication from his Government, perhaps quite unconnected with the drama of the moment.* This diplomatist was unable to resist the universal emotion surrounding him. I only saw him when I turned round after the King had entered the Parliament House. He was wiping his eyes.

Outside the ovation continued. In front of the Park, General de Coune, in command of the Civic Guard, rose in his stirrups, waving his sword, and revived the acclamations of the crowd by his own enthusiastic cheers, long after the King had disappeared. What a sacred and unforgettable emotion stirred the hearts of those Belgians who were privileged to be present that morning at that triumphal apotheosis of plighted faith, that noble affirmation by a whole nation of its will to live !

* We were not officially at war with Austria-Hungary until August 28, although—without our knowledge—Austrian heavy artillery was used to reduce the forts of Namur, which fell on August 24 and 25.

I was not present at the historic session of the combined Chambers, but an eye-witness told me that its incomparable grandeur was something indescribable.

Several military uniforms stood out in relief in the quivering throng where the King was able to say that there was now "only one party, that of the Fatherland." Two which were specially remarked were those of M. Hubin, the Socialist deputy, formerly a sergeant of Carabiniers, who had returned to the army, and of the Duc d'Ursel, a Catholic senator, who had enlisted the day before in the Guides as a volunteer private, at the age of forty-one !

The diplomatic gallery of a Parliament is, very naturally, not usually a place where the sentiments of the Assembly find a very emotional echo. But on that day, when the King declared that "a country which defends itself commands the respect of all, and cannot perish," and when M. de Broqueville hurled his famous defiance at Germany : "We may be conquered, but never subdued !" when the whole building seemed shaken by the frenzied acclamations of the hemicycle and the galleries, the epic grandeur of the spectacle brought tears to the eyes of more than one foreign diplomatist. Those tears do honour both to those who shed

them and to those whose lofty courage called them forth.

The very next day Brussels received the news of the first engagements at Visé and the victorious resistance of the forts of Liège to the formidable attack of five of the finest corps of the German army, still at its full strength.*

Belgium had suddenly entered into a heritage of glory, because she had fearlessly carried political probity to its extreme conclusions.

ALFRED DE BASSOMPIERRE.

* The Seventh, Eighth, Ninth, Tenth, and Eleventh Corps. See *L'Action de l'Armée belge*, p. 11.

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